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Azorius Ascendant: The Prelude

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Welcome back to Building on a Budget! As you may have inferred from the title of this article, I'll be playing around with the [Azorius Ascendant theme deck](#) in this column. This theme deck evolution will be handled differently than previous excursions into this domain – but I'll get to that in a moment.

Blue/White historically has been the classic control combination. One of the earliest successful decks, entitled appropriately enough, "The Deck", used a suite of [Mana Drains](#), [Counterspells](#), [Jayemdae Tomes](#), [Disrupting Scepters](#), [Swords to Plowshares](#), and other control cards to lock down the board, ending the game with [Serra Angel](#). Later successful U/W decks ranged from White Weenie splashing Blue for [Sleight of Mind](#) (and later [Mana Leak](#)), to [Zvi's "The Solution" deck](#) which won Pro Tour Tokyo in 1998.

The Azorius Guild, in theory, embodies the control aspect of U/W. From the [Dissension Minisite](#):

"To the intellectual Azorius guild, knowledge is power. Absolutely hierarchical, the Azorius believe that their laws and the preservation of those laws are responsible for maintaining the Guildpact. In fact, they believe their rigid system of governance is responsible for keeping nearly everything on Ravnica running smoothly. Justice is blind, as the saying goes, and that includes the guild's blindness to dissent, chaos, and crime."

With that in mind, let's take a look at the Azorius guild Theme Deck, Azorius Ascendant:

Azorius Ascendant		
Main Deck 60 cards		
9 Island	2 Benevolent Ancestor	1 Faith's Fetters
12 Plains	3 Tidewater Minion	1 Halcyon Glaze
2 Azorius Chancery	1 Zephyr Spirit	1 Sinstriker's Will
1 Prahv, Spires of Order	2 Azorius First-Wing	1 To Arms!
24 lands	1 Azorius Guildmage	2 Ocular Halo
	3 Beacon Hawk	1 Palliation Accord
	1 Isperia the Inscrutable	2 Plumes of Peace
	2 Minister of Impediments	1 Steeling Stance
	2 Mistral Charger	
	1 Paladin of Prahv	10 other spells
	2 Sky Hussar	
	3 Soulsworn Jury	
	2 Stoic Ephemera	
	1 Wakestone Gargoyle	
	26 creatures	

Man oh man, this deck is a mess! Well, maybe that isn't a bad thing – it definitely leaves multiple options open as to where the deck should be brought. Maybe brought is the wrong choice of word – more like dragged. Let's run Azorius Ascendant through my [five basic rules of deckbuilding](#).

Fix your Mana Base

The lands in Azorius Ascendant are fine, given the mix of cards present in the deck. Azorius Ascendant starts with twenty-four lands, fourteen of which produce white mana, and eleven of which produce Blue mana. This is fine, and doesn't need immediate attention.

Keep Close to 60 Cards

Azorius Ascendant contains exactly sixty cards. No problems here!

Focus Your Goals, but Don't be a Slave to your Theme

This is where Azorius Ascendant breaks down. The first question I ask myself when looking at a deck I've never seen before, is "what is this deck trying to do?" This might sound like a simplistic question, but it is an essential



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one. Take a look at the Azorius Ascendant decklist again. How many different themes can you see in this deck? Here's what I came up with:

Flyers: This theme deck is heavy on flying creatures, which makes sense – White and Blue are the two most flyer-intensive colors in **Magic**. When you put the two colors together, you get creatures which are better than ones that could be produced in mono-white or mono-blue. **Azorius First-Wing** is better than **Leonin Skyhunter**. **Isperia the Inscrutable** has a hefty combined nine power/toughness for only five mana. **Sky Hussar** swings like a Serra, but draws like an **Archivist**.

In total, this deck has eight flyers: **Azorius First-Wing**, **Beacon Hawk**, **Halcyon Glaze**, **Isperia the Inscrutable**, **Mistral Charger**, **Sky Hussar**, **Stoic Ephemera**, and **Wakestone Gargoyle**.

Defenders: If you're going to go to the air, you might as well have a bunch of high-toughness goons on the ground to soak up damage coming your way. Azorius Ascendant has a goodly number of creatures with Defender, including **Benevolent Ancestor**, **Soulsworn Jury**, **Stoic Ephemera**, **Tidewater Minion**, and **Wakestone Gargoyle**. There's just one problem – the defenders here don't add up together! **Wakestone Gargoyle** allows your defenders to attack, but **Tidewater Minion** can already attack, **Soulsworn Jury** has a scant one power, and **Benevolent Ancestor** has even less. Is part of the theme of Azorius Ascendant “when walls attack?” If so, we'd need to change the mix of defenders present.



Tapping/Untapping: There are multiple cards in Azorius Ascendant which concentrate on gumming up the board with tap/untap effects. These include **Azorius Guildmage**, **Beacon Hawk**, **Minister of Impediments**, **Plumes of Peace**, **Sky Hussar**, **Tidewater Minion**, and **To Arms!** Unfortunately, many of these seem to be redundant with one another.

For instance, what purpose does **Tidewater Minion** serve in this deck? As a ground creature, it is merely adequate at keeping the ground shored up – if my goal was to stop attacking creatures, I might look at **Kami of Old Stone** as a better, cheaper alternative. If I wanted to untap permanents...I'd have permanents worth untapping. Most of the flying creatures are too small to act as effective blockers, and the largest ground creatures are the **Tidewater Minions** themselves! **Minister of Impediments** and **Azorius Guildmage** seems like the most effective cards in this category, as they can play both offense (clearing out blockers) or defense (keeping creatures from attacking). **Plumes of Peace** seems clunky and mana-inefficient, especially since it costs five-mana to use as a defensive card. I'd rather spend five mana to get **Icy Manipulator** plus an activation.

Damage Prevention/Lifegain: As I mentioned in my opening paragraphs, one of the traditional masks worn by U/W is that of the uber-control deck. As such, the Azorius guild would want to stop the opponent from doing damage any way possible. The defensive cards which fall into this category include **Faith's Fetters**, **Paladin of Prahv**, **Palliation Accord**, and **Prahv, Spires of Order**. Unfortunately, most of these cards are clunky or inefficient. **Prahv** and **Palliation Accord** cost an excessive amount to use, whereas **Paladin of Prahv** can't be used defensively on your opponent's creatures (since it has to be played during your upkeep).

Upkeep Effects: The Azorius keyword ability is Forecast. Forecast reads as follows:

“Forecast – Pay a cost (might be mana, might be tapping your creatures), Reveal (card with Forecast) from your hand: Do some effect. (*Play this ability only during your upkeep and only once each turn.*)”

The cards with Forecast in this deck are **Paladin of Prahv**, **Plumes of Peace**, **Sky Hussar**, and **Steeling Stance**. The problem with Forecast is that it ties up your resources for the turn, which can be crippling if you're trying to develop the board on a curve. For instance, you have **Azorius First-Wing** on the board. Your opponent has just cast **Stinkweed Imp**. You have **Plumes of Peace** in your hand. Do you tie up two mana on your third turn to tap down the Imp? You have to make this decision before you see your card for that turn – so you might be stuck with no lands in hand, but be able to draw out of the situation with **Minister of Impediments** if you top-deck a land. Forecast cards stymie your ability to make choices later in the turn. The exception to this is **Sky Hussar**, once you hit five mana – at that point, it becomes a 4/3 cantrip, provided you have more than one creature in play.

Unfortunately, the cards in this deck don't play well with one another. What is this deck trying to do? Is it a weenie deck? Is it a flying deck? Is it a defensive deck? Is it an offensive deck? It's a little too much of each, which means it's not enough of any one.

From a play standpoint this is bad – you won't know how the deck will play out each game. Some games you might see flying Azorius. Some games you might see defenders Azorius. Some games you might end up with a bunch of defensive spells, and no way to kill your opponent.

From a deckbuilding standpoint, starting with a deck this unfocused is not necessarily a bad thing. We have at least five jumping-off points to start with on the deck. When tinkering with the deck, we can play around with the Flying, Upkeep, Defender, Defense, and Lifegain/Damage Prevention themes as we see fit! In fact, that's exactly what's going to happen later on in this article – you, the reader, will decide which way to take this deck in a future column!

I still expect this deck to be painful to play as-is, and I don't hold out much hope for winning games against any decks with a focus. We'll see if my assessment is correct.

Have a Curve

In general, Azorius Ascendant appears to have a decent curve. I've provided a chart with the mana-breakdowns of this deck.

Two-Mana Cards ■■■■■■■■■■
Three-Mana Cards ■■■■■■■■■■■■
Four-Mana Cards ■■■■■
Five-Mana Cards ■■■■■■■■
Six-Mana Cards ■■

Let's dig a little deeper into this curve, and examine the creatures:

Two-Drop creatures: 8 (3 [Beacon Hawk](#), 2 [Mistral Charger](#), 2 [Azorius First-Wing](#), 1 [Azorius Guildmage](#))

Three-Drop creatures: 10 (2 [Benevolent Ancestor](#), 3 [Soulsworn Jury](#), 2 [Stoic Ephemera](#), 2 [Minister of Impediments](#), 1 [Halcyon Glaze](#))

Four-Drop creatures: 1 (1 [Wakestone Gargoyle](#))

Five-Drop creatures: 6 (3 [Tidewater Minion](#), 2 [Sky Hussar](#), 1 [Isperia the Inscrutable](#))

Six-Drop creatures: 2 (1 [Zephyr Spirit](#), 1 [Paladin of Prahv](#))

See the problem here? Between two mana and five mana, there are no creatures designed to maintain an offense. All of the early drops are aggressive, but they are followed by a bunch of defenders or tappers, and curve out at five-drop 4/4 creatures which require four mana to attack each turn! Add in the cost of many of the activations in this deck ([Azorius Guildmage](#), [Tidewater Minion](#), [Wakestone Gargoyle](#), forecast cards, [Prahv](#), [Soulsworn Jury](#)), and we've got a deck where the curve is actually a lot worse than it appears.

Enchant Creature Cards are not your Friends

[Ocular Halo](#) has the potential to replace itself, if the creature it is enchanting does not die in response to the Halo being cast. [Plumes of Peace](#) and [Faith's Fetters](#) are fine, since they are designed mainly to enchant/neutralize opposing creatures. I don't like the [Sinstriker's Will](#), since it is just inviting a two-for-one exchange against your favor.

Let's take a look at a few of the sample games I played with the unaltered Azorius Ascendant theme deck, and see if my initial concerns for the deck hold up under play.

Game #1 – Azmodai (U/R [Gelectrode](#))

Azmodai mulligans down to three, and then gets stuck at two mana. I wouldn't even know what deck he was playing, except that I cast a fifth turn [Isperia](#), and was able to look at his hand. Even though this game was a win, it didn't really help me determine how to fix the deck – except to know that I could beat a mana-screwed opponent within the first seven turns of the game.

1-0



Game #2 – tsmr (B/W Comes-into-play)

I cast second and third turn [Mistral Chargers](#), and follow them with [Benevolent Ancestor](#) and [Soulsworn Jury](#). Tsmr starts out slow, but begins dropping his hand on the fourth turn. Back-to-back [Nekrataals](#) kill my two [Chargers](#), [Angel of Mercy](#) draws my [Jury](#) into the graveyard, and then [Blind Hunter](#) and [Faith's Fetters](#) shut down the rest of my board. I attempt to mount some sort of defense with [Tidewater Minion](#), but tsmr casts an end-of-turn [Ghostway](#).

I apologize to anyone who was on [Magic Online](#) at this time – I got beat so hard that the force of my loss crashed the program. My bad!

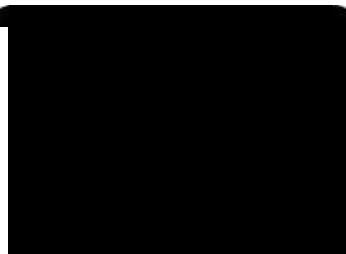
1-1

I had plenty of time to think about the match while I waited for [Magic Online](#) to reboot, but one thing was for certain – this deck was pretty defenseless against any opposing spells. Aside from [Soulsworn Jury](#), there's no countermagic in the deck (a hallmark of traditional U/W, both aggro and control), and there's very little I can do to prevent my creatures from dying to spells and effects (and White is famous for cards like [Mother of Runes](#) and [Blessed Breath](#)).

Game #3 – XxRufioX (B/W Weenie)

XxRufioX drops a first turn [Ghost-Lit Redeemer](#), and follows it with [Leonin Skyhunter](#). I drop [Azorius Guildmage](#) and [Pegasus Charger](#). Both of them are soon shackled in the [Pillory of the Sleepless](#). Thankfully, I have [Sky Hussar](#) in my hand, so I turn my two life-losing guys into a card a turn. When life gives you Pillories, make Pillory Juice!

I get down [Wakestone Gargoyle](#), and XxRufioX accidentally attacks into it with his [Skyhunter](#) ("I didn't see he had flying"). He follows with [Hunted Lammasu](#), and I get [Sky Hussar](#) onto the board. My Hussar and Gargoyle



double block the Lammasu the next turn, though Rufio still has **Agent of Masks** to bleed me with.

The two Pillories have been taking me down steadily, and so I need to kick my offense into first gear. His Redeemer and Agent make that a losing proposition, as he can gain three life a turn and I lose three life a turn, all without him attacking. I am able to swing in a couple of times, but he drops chump blockers, and I die to the ping.

1-2

Last game I learned that my deck can't deal with my opponent's spells and effects. This game I learned that I can't deal with my opponent's creatures, if they don't need to attack. This might not be an issue if I could go all-out offense, but this deck isn't capable of sustained pressure as-is.

Game #4 – Rawiswarrior (U/R/W Splice)

For the second game in a row, I get a Charger and a Guildmage on the second and third turns. Rawiswarrior casts **Murmurs from Beyond**, flipping three lands. He follows it with **Peer Through Depths**, splicing **Glacial Ray**, and killing my Guildmage. I drop **Sky Hussar**, and he smashes it with **Ire of Kaminari**.

I put **Ocular Halo** on **Pegasus Charger**, draw a card, cast **To Arms!**, draw a card, and then tap the **Pegasus Charger** to draw a third card. I know that the Charger will die to his **Glacial Ray**, but it's better to draw three cards (for a three card cost) now, and try to find a solution, rather than just sit with dead cards in my hand. **Peer Through Depths** plus **Spiritual Visit** plus **Glacial Ray** takes care of the Charger, though I do get **Halcyon Glaze** onto the table.

Well, that's all for naught. I cast **Tidewater Minion** the next turn, swing with **Halcyon Gaze**, and he casts **Ethereal Haze** splicing **Glacial Ray**. At the end of his turn, he casts **Reach Through Mists** plus **Glacial Ray** to bring me to thirteen. He main-phases **Lava Spike** and **Glacial Ray** and **Spiritual Visit**, bringing me to eight. I cast another **Tidewater Minion**, but don't have the mana to activate my first to attack. The game doesn't advance further, as he smacks me upside my head with an **Ire of Kaminari** for nine on his turn.

1-3

Well, **Plumes of Peace**, **Soulsworn Jury**, **Palliation Accord**, and **Zephyr Spirit** were all dead cards in this match. Seriously though, why is **Zephyr Spirit** in this deck? Why is **Zephyr Spirit** in any deck?

Game #5 – mightbe (U/R Card drawing)

I get a second turn **Mistral Charger**, and follow it with **Soulsworn Jury**. He casts **Psychic Possession**, which I answer with my second Blue mana, and a **Halcyon Glaze**. I attack him down to ten, but he casts **Pyroclasm** to kill my Charger, and then follows it with **Howling Mine**.

Even after the **Howling Mine**, I am stuck at four mana, and cannot cast any of the five-drop creatures in my hand to activate the Glaze. A turn goes by, and even though I drop **Pegasus Charger** the next turn and bring him to six life, he hits me with **Vision Skeins** (drawing him four cards thanks to his **Psychic Possession**) and **Cerebral Vortex** for a whopping seven damage.

He is forced to cast **Spiraling Embers** for ten on my **Mistral Charger**, as I have six damage on the board with the Glaze, and he is at six life. **Mightbe** drops **Ivory Crane Netsuke**, stabilizing his life total against my gaze. I attempt to cast **Wakestone Gargoyle**, and he **Disrupting Shoals** it, pitching **Psychic Possession**. On this turn, he gains four life, and then casts **Teferi's Puzzle Box**. This enables him to draw eight cards on my turn, and I am finished off by **Spiraling Embers** for fifteen on his turn.

1-4

Well, so far, no good. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that this deck really does pull in too many directions, and is in need of a fine tuning. There are, however, several directions in which to take the deck:

1. Air Attack!: **Mistral Charger** definitely pulled his weight, and there are a plethora of good flying White and Blue creatures available right now in Standard.
2. When Walls Attack!: Going with the **Wakestone Gargoyle** theme, there are a lot of high-power creatures with defender in Standard, and we could definitely move the deck towards this theme.
3. U/W Control: The classic control build, where we could load the deck up with creature kill and damage prevention, and rely on a few big threats (like **Isperia** or **Serra Angel**) to be the kill card.
4. **Sky Hussar** For the Win!: **Sky Hussar** was the best card (so far) in this pre-con, and it has definite applications to build a deck around, since it serves as both a card-drawing engine, and a finisher.

For this deck evolution, I'm leaving the choice up to you, the reader, as to where the deck goes! Vote this week in the poll for Flyers, Defenders, Control, or **Sky Hussar**, and the winning choice will be the way that Azorius Ascendant gets evolved in two weeks! Next week, I'll be doing a stand-alone build while the vote is tabulated, but after that we'll spend two weeks with the U/W senators from **Dissension**.



Wow, that U/W deck sure can be evolved in many different ways? Which way should Ben take Azorius Ascendant?

- Air Attack! I love beating down with flyers and weenies!
- When Walls Attack! I want to be on the cover of the Rolling Stone.
- U/W Control: I deny! I DENY!
- Sky Hussar For the Win! Hey, I heard this works well with Kiki-Jiki....

*Ben Bleiweiss has written about his obsession with **Magic: The Gathering** for over a decade. He's travelled the world because of **Magic**, both as a player and a writer. When not spending time playing **Magic**, writing about **Magic**, or thinking about **Magic**, Ben is employed by StarCityGames.com, where he works with **Magic** cards all day long. He lives with his wife in Virginia, and they sleep comfortably at night under their Orgg down comforter.*



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